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Nazism, The Jews and American Zionism, 1933-1948

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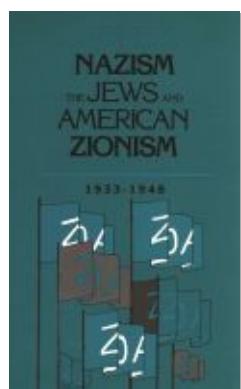
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# IV | AMERICAN ZIONISM AND THE HOLOCAUST

## THINKING ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE

Adolf Hitler's plan to exterminate European Jewry remained a secret until the summer of 1942. Even before the devastating news of Nazi mass murder reached the United States, American Jewish and Zionist leaders knew that their brethren in Hitler's lands were being subjected to terrible atrocities. At the Biltmore Conference of May 1942, Chaim Weizmann reported that the suffering of European Jewry was different in "quality" and "quantity" from that of the rest of the world. Hitler had declared war against the Jews in 1933, and since then Nazi pogroms, atrocities, and ghetto conditions were exacting a heavy toll. Weizmann concluded that "a cold, statistical calculation reveals the cruel fact that probably about 25 per cent of the Jews of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, will be, to use the modern word, 'liquidated.'"<sup>1</sup>

Nahum Goldmann, a brilliant political analyst, almost guessed what the Nazis' true intentions were in the spring of 1942. Goldmann urged the delegates at the Biltmore Hotel not to ignore Weizmann's grim prophecy. Nobody could know what European Jewry's final fate would be because

Who can foretell what the Nazi regime, once brought into the position of the surrounded killer, will do in the last moment before it goes down to shame? Do to Europe or the Jews under its command in the last moment before the downfall? But even as it is today, sometimes news reaches us, a glimpse of the situation is given, and every time it is a new horror and a new shock. One reports 800 killed a day in the Warsaw ghetto. I think it is exaggerated, because, if it

### *American Zionism and the Holocaust*

would be true, then in the course of two years the total of a half million Jews in the Warsaw ghettos may be wiped out. Now you don't have to be a great mathematician to figure out what will be the result of such a process, if it goes another year, two years, three years.

In spite of his fears, Goldmann didn't propose any program to come to the immediate aid of those threatened with annihilation. Instead, he called for the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth, and he urged Zionists to prepare "to enlarge the spheres of Jewish life" in postwar Europe. He specifically demanded new efforts to reach the Jews of the Soviet Union, whose removal from the Zionist world he called the most harmful "blow" directed against the Jewish people since the end of the First World War.<sup>2</sup>

By the summer of 1942, numerous unconfirmed reports of large-scale Nazi murder operations were circulating within the American Jewish community. On August 1, 1942, Dr. Gerhart Riegner, a German Jewish emigré and director of the Geneva office of the World Jewish Congress, received some startling information. Riegner, through a German source, learned that the Nazis were carrying out a plan to murder all the Jews under their control. According to Riegner's source, Nazi extermination centers would gas to death Jews from all German-occupied territories. Riegner asked that the American legation in Switzerland inform Stephen Wise about the Nazi murder plan. The legation sent a message off to Washington, but State Department bureaucrats decided not to forward Riegner's information to Wise. The American officials did not believe the seemingly fantastic information coming out of Switzerland.

Fortunately, Riegner had also sent his report, through British diplomatic sources, to World Jewish Congress leaders in London, who then contacted Stephen Wise in New York City. Wise shortly decided to request aid from the Roosevelt administration, and he contacted Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, a diplomat who was sympathetic to the plight of European Jewish refugees. In view of the unbelievable nature of Riegner's report, Welles asked Wise to wait for State Department confirmation before making news of the extermination public. Wise felt that he had no choice but to comply. Otherwise, he would alienate the State Department, the branch of the government to which he would have to look for help. Unfortunately, more than three months would pass before Wise could inform the American public about the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup>

While Wise honored his promise not to publicize the report, he did not keep the information secret from other Jewish and Zionist leaders. A few prominent Zionists also had their own European sources who reported similarly terrible news.<sup>4</sup> In mid-October 1942, Wise and several other Zionist leaders who were aware of the ongoing extermination of European Jewry met at the forty-fifth Annual Convention of the Zionist Organization of America.

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

When Wise first addressed the ZOA audience he refrained from any mention of the terrible fate of European Jewry.<sup>5</sup> He did speak of the European situation in a second speech at the end of the Zionist conclave. The Nazis, Wise declared, had decimated European Jewry, but they had not broken their “unconquerable” spirit. Jewry would not be “liquidated” nor “destroyed.” Wise promised the Jews in the German-occupied territories: “we will stand with you and by you and for you until you either go back to your homes in Europe, or forward to Eretz Israel.”<sup>6</sup>

Some Zionists at the 1942 meeting were more explicit than Wise. In the midst of a lengthy analysis of Zionist political aims, Nahum Goldmann casually remarked that Zionists did not have a realistic sense of what the position of European Jewry would be after the war. It would be a blessing, he said, if just half the Jews of occupied Europe survived the war. Goldmann continued: “You know what is going on with the deportations. Deportations mean deportation to certain death, and the Hitler regime has in the last months definely [sic] from a period of indirect starvation, discrimination and persecution and the extermination of the Jews, to a period of direct extermination by mass murder and mass slaughter.”<sup>7</sup> Judge Morris Rothenberg, a former president of the ZOA, referred to districts in Eastern Poland where Jews from all of Poland were brought to be shot. Rothenberg lamented that mankind had not experienced anything like the “systematic butchery” of innocent civilians that was taking place in Nazi-occupied Europe. He announced that the reported Nazi deportations of Jews to unknown places were, in fact, “part of the ruthless policy to exterminate the Jewish people and to reduce other populations to a state of helpless vassalage.”<sup>8</sup>

The almost nine hundred ZOA delegates attending the conference did not seem to grasp the significance of Goldmann’s and Rothenberg’s comments. Their descriptions of the German extermination policy were buried in the dozens of long and often tedious addresses that characterized most ZOA conferences.<sup>9</sup> Because Rothenberg and Goldmann delivered their speeches without any fanfare, the delegates should be forgiven for not recognizing the importance of their messages.

Rothenberg and Goldmann did not urge American Zionists to take any extraordinary steps to save their European brethren. In fact, all of the small group of leaders privy to Wise’s information initially responded to news of Hitler’s extermination program by assuming that the Jewish people would somehow survive what seemed to be just the latest in a long chain of tragedies that marked the two thousand years of Jewish exile from their national home. Selig Brodetsky’s message to the conference was typical: “Hitler has just reaffirmed his resolve [to] exterminate [the] Jewish people, but in spite of mass murders . . . practiced on our helpless brethren throughout occupied Europe, he will fail as many tyrants before him have failed.”<sup>10</sup> With an almost mystical belief in Jewry’s ability to persevere, Zionist leaders dedicated themselves to insuring that nazism would be the last crisis the Jewish people would have to endure. Accordingly, their commit-

ment to the Biltmore formula of Jewish statehood increased for, as Louis Lipsky proclaimed, “there must be an end of the homelessness of the Jewish people,” the root of all their suffering.<sup>11</sup>

Nahum Goldmann concurred with Lipsky’s analysis and lamented: “Our generation is in the tragic position that one-half of the generation is being slaughtered before our eyes, and the other half has to sit down and cannot prevent this catastrophe.” Goldmann, however, urged his audience not to despair, but instead to direct their energies to the creation of a Jewish state that would make future tragedies impossible.<sup>12</sup>

Goldmann’s call to action, like his warning about Nazi mass murders, did not lead to any spontaneous demonstrations of support by the ZOA delegates, probably because they and the entire American Zionist movement were already following the course set at the Biltmore Conference. Even as Stephen Wise waited for the State Department to corroborate Gerhart Riegner’s information about Nazi genocide, he and other American Zionists continued to plan for the opening of a grand and extraordinary meeting of all American Jewish leaders who, they hoped, would give the community’s blessing to Jewish statehood.

Leon Feuer, a disciple of Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, clearly enunciated the Zionist position as it stood by early November 1942 in his monograph, *Why a Jewish State*. The survival of a large number of European Jews was fundamental to Feuer’s case for Jewish statehood. Repeating an argument that Zionists had developed at the Biltmore Conference of May 1942, Feuer predicted that after the war, millions of Jewish refugees would find it impossible to return to normal lives in their European homes.<sup>13</sup>

German occupation authorities, according to Feuer, were subjecting European Christians to massive doses of anti-Semitic propaganda, and Jew hatred would continue to be a problem for some time after the Nazi defeat. Unless a solution to the Jewish problem was found, European anti-Semitism would again endanger the world. Hitler had used anti-Semitism as a tool to achieve power in Germany. Other demagogues and tyrants could use the same tool after the war to achieve their own ends, thereby jeopardizing world peace and stability.<sup>14</sup>

Palestine, Feuer argued, could solve both the long-term and immediate problems of Jewish homelessness. A Jewish state would give dignity and power to a people who had been subject to persecution and humiliation for centuries. It would also provide a home to the millions of stateless refugees expected to survive the war. No other country outside of Europe, he forecast, would be willing to open its gates to the millions of impoverished and demoralized Jews now caught in Hitler’s grasp. After the war, Feuer explained, “these countries will have their own heavy burdens of readjustment.” Only the Jews of Palestine were anxious to welcome their downtrodden brethren.<sup>15</sup>

Feuer, like most Jewish nationalists, believed that Zionists would have their last

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

chance to win international support for Jewish statehood at a great postwar peace conference. If they failed to take advantage of this great opportunity, he soberly warned, "it may never again present itself."<sup>16</sup>

### **FIRST RESPONSES TO THE EXTERMINATION OF EUROPEAN JEWRY**

Shortly after the publication of Feuer's pamphlet, Stephen Wise received a telegram from Undersecretary of State Welles asking him to come to the State Department. As he later remembered, a deeply troubled Welles told him on November 24, 1942, "'I have in my hands documents which have come to me from our legation in Berne. I regret to tell you, Dr. Wise, that these confirm and justify your deepest fears.'"<sup>17</sup>

Rabbi Wise immediately called a press conference and released the contents of Riegner's message. He also announced that the Nazis had already exterminated two million Jews. The *New York Times* on November 25, 1942, saw fit to carry news of the murders on page ten. The *Times* informed its readers of the existence of special extermination camps and reported that the State Department confirmed the accuracy of Wise's statements.<sup>18</sup>

The Wise announcement was electrifying. The rabbi and other Jewish leaders declared a day of fast and mourning for the dead and dying Jews of Europe.<sup>19</sup> The Jewish Labor Committee, a non-Zionist left-wing labor organization, called for a ten-minute work stoppage on the day of mourning, December 2, 1942. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America agreed to participate in the work stoppage, while Yeshiva University in New York agreed to cancel all classes.<sup>20</sup>

A week later, at the initiative of Stephen Wise, a delegation of American Jewish leaders met with President Roosevelt. The President offered his condolences and sympathy, but he suggested no plan for the immediate salvation of European Jewry.<sup>21</sup>

By this time it was apparent to American Jewish leaders that the immediate fate of European Jews could be determined only by the Germans who sought to destroy them or the Allies who might be able to rescue them. Roosevelt and Churchill had the resources and tools necessary to threaten Nazi leaders and the German people with retribution if they continued to slaughter the Jews. Allied pressure could be exerted on Hungary and other satellite states that had not yet agreed to turn their Jewish populations over to the Gestapo. The State Department and Foreign Ministry could negotiate with Turkey, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, and other neutral states that bordered the Reich and that could offer haven to those Jews who could escape from German-occupied territory. Only the American and British armies and air forces could launch military rescue operations. Thus,

## *American Zionism and the Holocaust*

American Jewish leaders could most effectively contribute to the salvation of their European brethren by making use of their contacts with high government officials and by initiating a national publicity campaign to focus public pressure on the Roosevelt administration and Congress to act on the behalf of European Jewry.

Shortly before the Jewish delegation met with Roosevelt, Peter Bergson, the leader of the Committee for a Jewish Army (CJA), wrote to Judge Louis Levinthal, the newly elected president of the Zionist Organization of America. The CJA was a small organization formed by a group of Palestinians sent to the United States by the Irgun, a right-wing Jewish underground group in Palestine. Prior to Wise's press conference, the CJA had been building American support for the creation of a Jewish Army to fight with the Allies against the Axis Powers. After Wise's announcement, the Bergson group began to devote most of its attention to publicizing the plight of European Jewry by attempting to put pressure on the Roosevelt administration to act. Bergson, in his letter to Levinthal, offered to form an alliance with the ZOA to press for rescue action.<sup>22</sup>

Levinthal refused to join hands with Bergson, but representatives of major Jewish organizations, including prominent Zionists, did respond to the situation by forming the Joint Emergency Committee on European Jewish Affairs, a body that excluded the Bergson group. The committee existed for only a few months, but it did engage in activities aimed at influencing the American government to rescue European Jewry. American Zionists were in the forefront of these efforts, which included the lobbying of representatives in Congress in an unsuccessful bid to convince the legislature to take a stand on rescue. The emergency committee also desperately tried to influence the State Department to develop rescue programs. Primarily, the committee concerned itself with sponsoring mass meetings throughout the nation calling for government action on rescue.<sup>23</sup>

The most important of the American Jewish mass meetings was the "Stop Hitler Now" rally organized by the American Jewish Congress with the cooperation of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. On March 1, 1943, over 21,000 people jammed into New York's Madison Square Garden as an expression of support for the millions of European Jews threatened with extinction. Jewish leaders presented an eleven-point rescue program to the rally requesting the Allied powers to:

1. Negotiate with Germany and her satellites through neutral states in order to win freedom of emigration for Jews under Hitler's control.
2. Open sanctuaries and havens in Allied and neutral countries for any Jews who might be released by the Axis.
3. Liberalize American immigration practices, so that existing American quotas would be completely filled.<sup>24</sup>
4. Open England's door to as many Jewish refugees as would not constitute a danger to her national security.

*Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

5. Urge Latin American nations to modify their restrictive immigration policies.
6. Open the doors of Palestine to Jewish immigration thereby ending the White Paper limitations.
7. Guarantee financial assistance to neutral countries that provide sanctuary for refugees, and promise to provide the refugees with a permanent haven as soon as possible.
8. Devise a system to provide food to starving Jews under Nazi control.
9. Establish an intergovernmental agency to implement a rescue program.
10. Provide financial guarantees for the execution of the rescue program outlined.
11. Establish a war crimes commission that would outline the procedure by which Nazi war criminals would be brought to justice.<sup>25</sup>

The rally's eleven-point plan was a workable and comprehensive strategy for rescue. In December 1942, the editors of the *New York Times* had sadly noted that the most tragic aspect of Hitler's extermination of European Jewry was "the world's helplessness to stop the horror while the war is going on." After the "Stop Hitler Now" rally, the editors were more optimistic about the Allies' ability to resist Hitler's slaughter and warned that "the United Nations governments have no right to spare any efforts that will save lives, even though dealings with the German and German-controlled states may be necessary."<sup>26</sup> Anne O'Hare McCormick, in her widely read *Times* column "Abroad," wrote that the "Christian world's" failure to support the rescue proposal would be "an act of submission to Hitler."<sup>27</sup>

In succeeding years, various private and governmental agencies would refine and compile plans on how these specific suggestions could be put into effect. Point #9, calling for the establishment of a rescue agency, was clearly the most important rescue proposal. The Nazi regime had made the destruction of European Jewry a war aim and had established a sophisticated bureaucracy to coordinate the resources and "skills" necessary to accomplish it. Clearly, only a correspondingly comprehensive effort on the part of the American government held out the hope of halting, or at least impeding, the destruction process. A governmental rescue agency would be able to coordinate the military, diplomatic, and financial resources needed to resist Hitler's "war against the Jews." In fact, it is difficult to justify Franklin Roosevelt's failure to establish such a commission as soon as news of the Holocaust was released.<sup>28</sup>

The other ten proposals also reflected the shrewd perceptivity of American Jewish leaders. Even in March 1943, it was apparent that the major obstacle to rescue was the unwillingness of outside countries to accept Jews. Several of the eleven

proposals (numbers 2–7) dealt with that difficult problem. While Germany might not have been willing to negotiate the release of Jews under its control, by 1943 it was clear that some German satellite states, including Bulgaria and Romania, were searching for ways to ingratiate themselves with the Allies who seemed to be on their way to victory over the Third Reich. In order to carry out these delicate negotiations, an Allied rescue agency that could coordinate the activities of the State and Treasury Departments was clearly essential.<sup>29</sup>

American Zionists, particularly Stephen Wise, played important roles in the organization of the “Stop Hitler Now” rally, and they were in the forefront of all of the Joint Emergency Committee’s actions. Their attempts to induce the United States government to rescue European Jewry, however, did not divert their attention away from the goal of Jewish statehood. In fact, Zionists generally and understandably responded to confirmed news of the ongoing European tragedy with an increased commitment to their original program. They had, after all, based their demand for Jewish statehood on the belief that the restoration of a Palestinian homeland would once and for all solve the problem of anti-Semitism and Jewish persecution. Only through Zionist work, Chaim Weizmann wrote in December 1942, “can we find consolation—that perhaps a better day will come for those who will survive this holocaust.”<sup>30</sup> *Youth and Nation*, the journal of the Hashomer Hatzair, a left-wing Zionist group, similarly asked its readers to devote themselves to the establishment of a “free Jewish nation” that would spare future generations of Jews from the recurrence of such a tragedy,<sup>31</sup> while Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver called for the settlement of one dunam [about a quarter acre] of Palestine’s land for every murdered Jew.<sup>32</sup>

This is not to say that Zionist leaders were not also deeply concerned with steps directed at immediate rescue. In early December 1942, Zionist leaders, including Rose Halprin, Tamar de Sola Pool, Meyer Weisgal, and Hayim Greenberg, met to discuss the rescue situation. Most of them agreed that it was of utmost importance to concentrate on steps that might halt the Nazi mass murder of European Jewry. Zionist leaders believed that they should wait until the American public was firmly committed to rescuing European Jewry before they suggested Jewish statehood as the ultimate remedy to Jewish persecution.<sup>33</sup>

Several months after the December meeting, Hayim Greenberg, a leader of the Poale Zion in the United States, published in the Yiddish press a blistering attack on the American Jewish organizations for failing to concentrate their resources on an aggressive campaign to force the U.S. government to attempt rescue actions. Greenberg accused American Jews of behaving in a morally bankrupt fashion, and he marveled at the lack of a frenzied response on the part of a people who had learned that millions of their brethren were being brutally eliminated.<sup>34</sup>

Greenberg’s case was overstated. American Jews and Zionists were working for rescue, though not at the pace Greenberg would have preferred. They had met with President Roosevelt and other members of the administration, circulated

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

petitions demanding that the Allies take steps to rescue European Jewry, held news conferences, and released press statements. The March 1 “Stop Hitler Now” rally was a huge success and did produce a valuable list of rescue proposals. The left-wing Zionist journal, *Youth and Nation*, hoped that the rally and other forms of American Jewish pressure would force the United States to abandon its policy of inaction and that the Roosevelt administration would become a leading agent in the rescue of European Jewry.<sup>35</sup>

### THE BERMUDA CONFERENCE

American and British Jewish pressure did, in fact, force a response from the Allied governments. In early March 1943, Washington and London announced that they would hold a conference to develop plans to aid European Jewry. British and American officials originally planned to have the rescue conference in Ottawa, Canada, but they later decided to switch the location to Bermuda because reporters and the representatives of Jewish organizations would be less likely to intrude on the privacy of the conferees.<sup>36</sup>

The Bermuda Conference opened on April 19, 1943. On that same day, Jewish resistance fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto rose up against their Nazi oppressors. While the Warsaw Ghetto fighters armed with pistols and Molotov cocktails battled against German SS troops, British and American representatives at Bermuda deliberated about the fate of European Jewry. Harold Willis Dodds, the president of Princeton University, led the American delegation at Bermuda. It also included Senator Scott Lucas (D., Ill.) and Representative Sol Bloom (D., N.Y.). Richard K. Law, the Parliamentary Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, led the British group. American Jews and Zionists hoped that the Bermuda discussants would develop a plan for the salvation of European Jewry. Jewish organizations submitted memoranda and written rescue plans to British and American authorities, which essentially repeated the proposals made at the “Stop Hitler Now” rally.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, even before the opening of the rescue conference, there were signs that the Allied powers were not willing to rise to the challenge of Nazi mass murder.

Any realistic plan to save European Jewry would have to deal with the question of what to do with Jewish refugees once they were freed from Hitler’s clutches. Given the experiences of the last decade, there seemed little chance that the American Congress would be willing to liberalize immigration quotas, which severely restricted the entry of East Europeans into the United States. Wartime passions had, if anything, strengthened nativist sentiments in the United States. The British, for their part, were adamant in their determination to abide by the White Paper restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine to 75,000 over the five years from 1939–44. Already hard pressed in the fight against the Axis, British mili-

tary and political leaders wanted to avoid any unrest or rebellion among the Arabs of the strategically important Middle East. The British were clearly unwilling to ease restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine even if it jeopardized attempts to rescue Jews. On February 4, 1943, Lord Halifax, the British ambassador to the United States, sent Stephen Wise the good news that the government of Bulgaria, a German satellite state, had agreed to allow a large number of Jewish children and a smaller group of adults to leave for Palestine. However, the British ambassador was careful to inform Wise that London would continue to abide by the White Paper. He also wrote, "The very considerable difficulties involved in making the necessary arrangements for transport and for the accommodation and sustenance in Palestine of such large parties of refugees may limit the numbers that can be handled under this procedure."<sup>38</sup>

The Bermuda Conference failed to change the fate of the millions of Jews destined for the gas chambers. The American representatives to the conference announced that the most efficient way to rescue European Jewry was to ensure a speedy Allied victory. They implied that the Jewish rescue proposals, if implemented, would hinder the Allied war effort. America's refusal to consider any plan involving a breaching of the nation's immigration quota wall handicapped the Bermuda Conference from the day of its opening, as did the British refusal to deviate from the White Paper restrictions. Despite optimistic statements following the conference by the participants, the only concrete action taken at Bermuda was the revival of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (ICCR) first established by the 1938 Evian Conference. The ICCR, however, proved to be no more capable of effective action in 1943 than it had been in 1938.<sup>39</sup>

Shortly after the Bermuda Conference, Peter Bergson's Committee for a Jewish Army placed a large advertisement in the *New York Times* charging that "to 5,000,000 Jews in the Nazi Death Trap, Bermuda was a Cruel Mockery." The ad demanded that the Allies set up an agency to rescue the Jews of Europe.<sup>40</sup>

The leaders of the established American Jewish organizations responded to the conference's failure to act upon rescue with dismay, incredulity, and disappointment. In a May 2 address to the National Conference for Palestine, Abba Hillel Silver noted that the Allies had been no more supportive of Jewish efforts to save their European brethren from annihilation. They express sympathy, Silver said, and ask us to be patient. That all European Jewry might be dead when victory was finally won, Silver angrily declared, "does not seem to arouse these friends of ours to any extraordinary emergency acts of rescue and deliverance." The Bermuda Conference, ostensibly convened to satisfy popular humanitarian demands, was "never" intended to do anything to adequately respond to the tragedy. Silver sadly concluded that "clearly the friends upon whom we had hoped to lean have turned out to be broken reeds. The enemies of Israel seek us out and single us out, but our friends would like to forget our existence as a people."

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

Lacking practical expedients, Silver lapsed into the almost mystical rhetoric through which Zionists sustained themselves in adversity: “*The inescapable logic of events! When the doors of the world will be closed to our people, then the hand of destiny will force open the door of Palestine. And that hour is rapidly approaching.*” [Italics in original.] Zionists, Silver stressed, had been proven correct in their belief that the lack of a Jewish national home led to persecution and murder. He urged all American Zionists to remain faithful to the cause of Jewish statehood. The Allied powers, according to Silver, would have to provide the Jews with a state in order to achieve a stable postwar world. Reactionary forces had used anti-Semitism, created by Jewish homelessness, time and again in their struggle for power and conquests, and unless the Jewish situation was changed, it would be used again.

Silver concluded his address on a messianic note, which reflected his belief that it was God’s will to put an end once and for all to the primary cause of Jewish misery. He told his audience that Jewish sages taught that two arks led the Children of Israel through the desert to the Promised Land. One ark contained the body of the Patriarch Joseph, while the other held the tablets of law, divinely delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai. There were two arks, he repeated, “the Ark of death and the Ark of faith!” Today, Silver continued, another ark of death, this one carrying two million dead Jews was “leading us . . . through the wilderness to Palestine!” Along with the martyred Jews of Europe, an Ark of Faith also moved, “our covenant with the future, our faith in our destiny.” If this latest tragedy of persecution was to be the last ever suffered by Jewry, they would have to resolve finally to put an end to Jewish homelessness, the cause of anti-Semitism. He concluded, “we now wish to be noble and free and as a free people in its own land.”<sup>41</sup>

The day after Silver’s eloquent appeal for continued insistence on a Jewish state, leading American Zionists met to discuss the Bermuda Conference. Moshe Furmansky, a left-wing socialist Zionist and a proponent of a binational Arab-Jewish state in Palestine, argued that Zionists must take immediate action to offset the American and British failure at Bermuda. He suggested that American Zionists immediately organize a mass protest campaign against the White Paper’s restriction on Jewish immigration to Palestine. Nahum Goldmann seconded Furmansky’s proposal, but added that if Zionists wanted to conduct a massive attack on the White Paper, they would have to cease demonstrating against the massacre of European Jewry. Goldmann explained that the Zionists’ limited resources made it impossible to engage in two major campaigns at the same time. He agreed with Abba Hillel Silver that after Biltmore, it was now necessary “to emphasize the preeminence of the Zionist program in relation to the refugee question.”

Rabbi Wolf Gold, a leader of Mizrachi, the Orthodox Jewish Zionist organization, disagreed with Goldmann. He believed that action against the White Paper was “long overdue,” but he didn’t understand why it would preclude mass action

against the Nazi extermination program. Gold maintained that the two issues could be linked together, since the only answer to the problem of rescue was to open the gates of Palestine.<sup>42</sup>

While Gold and Goldmann disagreed about the relationship of a drive to press the government to attempt rescue and an anti-White Paper campaign, no one at the meeting questioned whether Nazi extermination policies threatened to undermine the Zionist argument for Jewish statehood. Long after Stephen Wise's terrifying November 1942 announcement, Zionists continued to insist that a large number of homeless Jews would survive the war and that the only practical solution to their plight would be resettlement in a Jewish state in Palestine. Few American Zionists seemed to realize that Nazi gas chambers threatened to solve the whole problem in a most gruesome manner.

In mid-1943, one lone voice within the councils of American Zionism questioned the logic of remaining loyal to the Biltmore resolution's demand for a Jewish commonwealth while the Holocaust continued. Chaim Weizmann, by the middle of 1943, had been engaged in an increasingly bitter personal dispute with David Ben-Gurion for a number of years. Although Weizmann had supported the Biltmore resolution in 1942, he believed that Ben-Gurion and other Zionists were attaching too much importance to its demand for a Jewish commonwealth. The Biltmore declaration, he maintained, was "just" a resolution, "like the hundred and one resolutions usually passed at great meetings in this country, or in any other country."<sup>43</sup> On June 1, 1943, Weizmann then in the United States for an extended visit, attended a meeting of the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs (AECZA). He told the Jewish nationalist leaders at the meeting that he would soon be leaving the United States with a "heavy heart" and that he wished to make "a few summary remarks." Zionists, he said, had to consider seriously the implications of the Nazi extermination of European Jewry. Where, he asked, will the millions of Jews who were supposed to go to Palestine come from? In Nazi-occupied Europe, only the courageous few who were lucky enough to have the means to endure would survive the war. The Soviet Union would probably not let any Jews left in Russia after the war go to Palestine because of the traditional communist opposition to Zionism. Weizmann also noted that the five million Jews of the United States would not go to Palestine unless "driven." Therefore, given the demographic and internal problems confronting Zionists and the lack of American and British support for Jewish statehood, Weizmann urged Jewish nationalists to abandon "old methods" and "slogans" and to seek out new strategies and positions. These, however, he did not specify. Weizmann explained that when Zionists passed the Biltmore resolution they "were genuinely convinced that the Jewish state would be realized 'tomorrow.'" Unfortunately, that was not to be, and, Weizmann concluded, the Biltmore program was a "symbol" and a "flag" but not practical politics.<sup>44</sup>

Weizmann's stark and depressing analysis of the problems confronting the Zion-

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

ist movement sparked a lively discussions among the AECZA leaders. Rabbi Meyer Berlin, a Palestinian leader of Mizrachi who was also on a visit to the United States, argued that such a bleak portrayal of the Zionist future would be strongly opposed in Palestine where the Yishuv generally believed that peace would bring the implementation of the Biltmore program. He also pointed out that no one could accurately forecast how many Jews would survive the “massacres” in Europe; millions of Jews might well endure. The rabbi insisted that the establishment of the Jewish right to “Eretz Israel” was still the most important task confronting the Zionist movement.<sup>45</sup>

The furor caused by Weizmann’s comments continued after the AECZA meeting. On June 25, Weizmann wrote Stephen Wise that his remarks at the meeting “have been construed as a deviation from the Biltmore program and that as a result a cable has been sent to Palestine in protest against this ‘heresy.’” Subjected to censure and criticism, Weizmann retreated from his position. Publicly, he followed the orthodox Zionist line of demanding, on behalf of persecuted European Jewry, the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine, while he privately worried about the consequences of European Jewry’s demise on the Zionist program.<sup>46</sup>

Writing in 1944 to Meyer Weisgal, his strongest American supporter, Weizmann warned that the successful extermination of European Jewry would undermine the Zionist case for statehood. He wrote:

The main argument based on pressure due to anti-Semitism loses its force if only a very small number of Jews remain alive in Europe after the war. I am quite sure that our opponents are already reckoning on this in their own minds, though they do not speak about it yet because it would be very ungracious to make political capital out of such a catastrophe. But when everything is over, and the facts become known, they will speak for themselves. And any demand of ours based on the imperative necessity of transferring large numbers of Jews speedily to Palestine will then fall to the ground.

Weizmann counselled Weisgal to begin recruiting large numbers of American youth for settlement in Palestine as a way out of the dilemma caused by the Holocaust.<sup>47</sup>

### THE AMERICAN JEWISH CONFERENCE

As Chaim Weizmann despaired about the effects of mass extermination on Jewish nationalism, and while Allied planning for the Bermuda Conference continued, Zionists prepared to continue the work they had begun at the Biltmore Hotel in May 1942. Now that American Zionists were united around the statehood goal, they began to organize a national conference representing all American Jews, which

## *American Zionism and the Holocaust*

would endorse the Zionist program.<sup>48</sup> In early 1943, prominent American Zionists convinced Henry Monsky, the President of B'nai B'rith, to send a letter to the leaders of thirty-four major American Jewish organizations. American Jewry, Monsky wrote, would have to represent the interests of all the Jewish people at the peace conference that would follow the Allied victory over the fascists. Monsky wanted to avoid any conflict between American Jewish groups at the peace conference, and he invited the leaders of the thirty-four organizations to meet with him in Pittsburgh to formulate a united American Jewish plan for the postwar reconstruction of European Jewry.<sup>49</sup> Monsky did not mention the creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine in his letter, but the Zionists who were helping him plan the conference intended to use it to advance their own program.<sup>50</sup>

Jewish leaders met in Pittsburgh three times during the weekend of January 23 and 24, 1943. Many of the seventy-eight delegates were Zionists. Israel Goldstein, Louis Levinthal, and Morris Rothenberg represented the Zionist Organization of America, while Rose Halprin was one of the three Hadassah delegates present. Some of their ablest leaders represented the Orthodox religious Mizrachi organization and the socialist Zionists, including Leon Gellman (Mizrachi), and Hayim Greenberg and David Wertheim (socialist).<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately for the Zionists, the prestigious American Jewish Committee refused to attend the Pittsburgh conference. The conservative and elitist Committee rejected the concept of Jewish nationhood, but had for sometime supported “non-political” projects to settle Jews in Palestine. However, by early 1943, the American Jewish Committee’s leadership was disturbed by the increasing power of American Zionism and by the movement’s decision at Biltmore to campaign aggressively for the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine.<sup>52</sup>

Participants in the Pittsburgh meetings decided to organize an American Jewish Assembly where representatives of the entire American Jewish community could debate the critical issues of the day. They devised an elaborate election system to ensure that the 500 delegates who attended the assembly would be democratically selected. National Jewish organizations participating in the assembly would select 125 of the delegates. Local Jewish communities would select the remainder. The number of representatives dispatched by each community would depend on the size of its Jewish population.<sup>53</sup>

The original intention of those Zionists planning the American Jewish Conference was to win the support of the entire American Jewish community for the creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine. The failure of the small but influential American Jewish Committee to attend the preliminary Pittsburgh meeting threatened to undermine the success of the conference. It would be difficult for Zionists to argue that they had the support of all American Jews if the American Jewish Committee was absent from the conference. Because the Committee objected to the term *assembly*, arguing that it implied that American Jews were a distinct and

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

separate political group, Monsky and his colleagues agreed to change the name of the assembly to the American Jewish Conference. The American Jewish Committee also convinced the conference's organizers to agree that any decisions made by the delegates would not be binding on any organization that chose to attend.<sup>54</sup>

As they negotiated with the Committee to ensure its participation, Zionist leaders had to confront the fact that even if the Committee chose to attend the American Jewish Conference, there was little likelihood that it would consent to support the Biltmore program. In early 1943, the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs met to discuss what steps to take regarding the American Jewish Committee. Some Zionist leaders stubbornly refused to alter the Biltmore program's support of a Jewish commonwealth even if it meant a complete break with the American Jewish Committee. Others hoped that a way could be found to win the cooperation of the Committee, and they urged that "nothing be done" to alienate those Committee members who might be eventually won over to the Jewish nationalist position. After long deliberation, the AECZA finally decided that Zionists should privately continue negotiating with the American Jewish Committee provided that nothing be done to limit the freedom of the Zionists to present the Biltmore program to the American Jewish Conference.<sup>55</sup>

The leaders of the constituent organizations of the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs organized efficient electoral campaigns to insure that American Jewish communities elected a substantial number of Zionists to the American Jewish Conference. Several leaders of the AECZA understood that Zionists could campaign "too hard," however, and explained that "the impression must be avoided that the Zionists are out to capture all the delegates."<sup>56</sup>

American Zionists, who had been instrumental in the organization of the conference, did remarkably well in the elections held to choose representatives to the assembly. Due to the organizational ability of the Zionist leadership and the hard work of rank and file members, well over half of the 501 delegates at the American Jewish Conference were affiliated with an established Zionist organizations. Conference organizers estimated that "at least 2,225,000 Jews participated directly or indirectly" in the elections, held in all forty-eight states and the District of Columbia, which selected 379 of the delegates. National Jewish organizations, including Zionist groups and the pro-Zionist American Jewish Congress and the B'nai B'rith, appointed the remaining 123 delegates according to a key agreed on at the Pittsburgh meeting. The non-Zionist American Jewish Committee and Jewish Labor Committee were represented.<sup>57</sup>

The original agenda for the American Jewish Conference included only two major items for discussion: the future of Palestine and the postwar reconstruction of the Jewish communities of Europe. Conference organizers added the rescue issue only when Jewish popular pressure demanded it. However, no one doubted that the main task of the conference was to deliberate about the future of Palestine.

### *American Zionism and the Holocaust*

According to Joseph Halbert, a delegate from Atlantic City, his community discussed only the commonwealth issue when it voted to select its representatives to the conference.<sup>58</sup>

As the day for the opening of the conference approached, the Zionist political position became even more complex and confused as some Jewish nationalist leaders, continuing their effort to ensure the support of the American Jewish Committee, recognized that they would have to moderate their statehood demand. Officially, the major American Zionist organizations maintained that their delegates at the American Jewish Conference were pledged to support the Biltmore resolution. Louis Lipsky, Emanuel Neumann, Abba Hillel Silver, and others hoped that the conference would give its stamp of approval to the goal of Jewish statehood. However, some Zionist leaders, in particular Nahum Goldmann, pressed for some moderation in the Zionist approach to the conference. They did not oppose the eventual creation of a Jewish state, but they didn't think it was possible to unite the American Jewish community around this goal in 1943. They argued that it would be more profitable for Zionists to win the conference's support for a resolution that would strongly oppose the British White Paper and that would call for unlimited Jewish immigration to Palestine. Through his talks with leaders of the American Jewish Committee, Goldmann knew that they would support the demand for Jewish immigration to Palestine provided it was clearly separated from any call for statehood. While such a position did represent a tactical retreat from the Biltmore resolution, in Goldmann's view it did not undermine the eventual establishment of a Jewish political entity in Palestine. The creation of a Jewish majority, after all, would set the stage for Jewish political control of Palestine.<sup>59</sup>

On August 29, 1943, five hundred delegates and fifteen hundred guests gathered at the Waldorf Astoria for the opening of the American Jewish Conference. To symbolize the seriousness of the occasion, the room was left undecorated except for the American flag and the blue-and-white Star of David flag of the Zionist movement. A memorial service for the European Jewish victims followed the singing of the "Star Spangled Banner" and "Hatikvah" ("The Hope"), the Zionist anthem.<sup>60</sup>

B'nai B'rith president Henry Monsky welcomed the delegates and reminded them that Hitler had declared war against the Jewish people before he attacked the rest of the civilized world. However, he lamented:

It is with regret that we record the lack of practical measures for the relief of the millions who have been persecuted, pillaged, pilloried and devastated. Many statements of sympathy and compassion have been issued by our Government and its allies. Such statements are reassuring, but distressingly ineffective so far as the plight of the victims is concerned.

American Jews had to act promptly and in unison if they wanted to save European Jewry. Palestine, he continued, had a large role to play in solving the postwar prob-

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

lems that the Jewish people would confront. Monsky demanded that the British White Paper of 1939 be withdrawn, but he avoided calling for the immediate creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine.<sup>61</sup>

Stephen Wise also made no mention of the creation of a Jewish commonwealth in his address to the conference. Jews, Wise said, totally supported the Allied war effort, yet they were singled out by Great Britain and discriminated against. White Paper immigration restriction must end, he proclaimed, and the gates of Palestine must be opened to the Jewish refugees. He was confident that the American Jewish Conference would unanimously and forcefully express its opposition to the White Paper.<sup>62</sup>

Other speakers at the American Jewish Conference followed the trend set by Monsky and Wise and avoided asking the conference to endorse the Biltmore resolution's demand for the immediate creation of a Jewish state. Nahum Goldmann announced that he would be satisfied if Great Britain gave the Yishuv complete control over immigration to Palestine. The creation of a Zionist state, he concluded, could wait until Jews made up a majority of Palestine's population.<sup>63</sup>

The American Jewish Committee, through its president, Judge Joseph Proskauer, responded positively to the Zionists' moderate approach. Proskauer, in his address to the conference, praised the achievements of the Yishuv and said: "We are one in our concern for its [the Yishuv's] preservation and upbuilding, and I do not believe we would ever have a difference in adopting a formula along the lines that Dr. Wise suggested, of keeping the gates of Palestine open."<sup>64</sup>

Not all American Zionists were pleased with the abandonment of the Biltmore program. Emanuel Neumann believed that the very purpose of organizing the American Jewish Conference had been to win the support of American Jewry for the creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine. He approached Abba Hillel Silver, who was also displeased with the course of the conference, and asked him to speak in favor of Jewish statehood. Silver was not scheduled to appear before the conference. Zionist leaders willing to cooperate with the American Jewish Committee apparently feared that Silver, a fiery speaker, might undermine the fragile relationship they had worked out with Proskauer. But Neumann was able to arrange for Silver to address the entire conference on Monday night, August 30, 1943.<sup>65</sup>

### **ABBA HILLEL SILVER AND THE "RESCUE" OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE**

Silver, then fifty years old and at the peak of his capabilities, proved more than able to meet the task that Neumann set for him. In a masterful speech, he championed the ideal of Jewish statehood and defeated all those who had sought com-

## American Zionism and the Holocaust

promise. He brilliantly reflected the concerns and hopes of an American Jewry that was living through the hell of a war in which millions of their brethren were being butchered.

Calling on his audience to look beyond the war years, Silver opened his speech by declaring:

My dear friends, the Jewish people is in danger of coming out of this war the most ravaged of peoples and the least healed and restored. The stark tragedy of our ravage has been abundantly told here and elsewhere—tragic, ghastly, unredeemed. To rehearse it again is only to flagellate oneself and to gash our souls again and again. But what of the healing? What is beyond the rim of blood and tears? Frankly to some of us, nothing.

The rabbi warned that many Jews were falsely hoping that the Second World War would achieve “what an Allied victory failed to give them after the last war, what a whole century of enlightenment, liberalism and Progress failed to give them—peace and security.” Putting one’s faith in international treaties and guarantees of minority rights was naive. These solutions did not take into account the principal cause of Jewish suffering, “the immemorial problem of our national homelessness.” All Jewish history since the exile from Palestine consisted of one long line of tragedies. He explained:

There is a stout black cord which connects the era of Fichte in Germany with its feral cry of “hep, hep,” and the era of Hitler with its cry of “Jude verrecke.” The Damascus affair of 1840 links up with the widespread reaction after the Revolution of 1848—the Mortara affair of Italy; the Christian Socialist Movement in the era of Bismark; the Tisza-Ezlar affair in Hungary; the revival of blood accusations in Bohemia; the pogroms of the 80s in Russia; *La France Juive* and the Dreyfus affair in France; the pogroms of 1903; the Ukrainian blood baths after the last war and the human slaughter houses of Poland in this war.

There was only one solution for the “persistent emergency,” the “millennial tragedy” of Jewish life. Resettlement programs, refugee havens, these were not solutions. “There is but one solution for national homelessness. That is a national home!”

Silver declared that there could be no compromise on the commonwealth demand. Jewish statehood was more than ideology. It was the “cry of despair” of a people who had suffered yesterday, were suffering today, and would probably suffer tomorrow if their prayer was not answered. Silver proclaimed that the “crucifixion” of the Jewish people must end, saying:

From the infested, typhus-ridden ghetto of Warsaw, from the death-block of Nazi occupied lands, where myriads of our people are awaiting execution by

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

the slow or the quick method, from a hundred concentration camps which befoul the map of Europe, from the pitiful ranks of our wandering hosts over the entire face of the earth, come the cry: "Enough; there must be a final end to all of this, a sure and certain end."

To those who believed that the cause of unity justified compromise on the Biltmore program, Silver explained: "I am for unity in Israel, for the realization of the total program of Jewish life, relief, rescue, reconstruction, and the national restoration in Palestine. I am not for unity on a fragment of the program, for a fragment of the program is betrayal of the rest of the program and a tragic futility besides." As Ben-Gurion had argued several years earlier, Silver maintained that only a Jewish government would allow Jews to enter Palestine in large numbers. Great Britain's betrayal of its Balfour Declaration pledge clearly proved that Zionists could not rely on the goodwill of Christian governments, which would only protect the Jews if it served their own national interests. Silver realized that the survival of his people was a political, not a humanitarian issue, and that it would be insured only if the Jews understood that:

We cannot truly rescue the Jews of Europe unless we have free immigration to Palestine. We cannot have free immigration into Palestine unless our political rights are recognized there. Our political rights cannot be recognized there unless our historic connection with the country is acknowledged and our right to rebuild our national home is reaffirmed. The whole chain breaks if one of the links is missing.

Silver warned the conference delegates that if they failed to pass a resolution that mentioned the need for a Jewish commonwealth, that the Jewish delegation to the Allied peace conference at the war's end would have nothing more than an "immigration aid plea to let Jews go to Palestine, as if Palestine were for us another Santo Domingo?"<sup>66</sup>

As Silver finished speaking, the conference audience spontaneously arose and sang "Hatikvah," the Zionist anthem. The highly emotional ovation that followed sealed Silver's victory over those who had attempted to avoid the commonwealth issue.<sup>67</sup>

The crowd that reacted to Silver's speech and the masses of American Jews who flocked to the Zionist movement in the years that followed were responding to Hitler's extermination of their European brothers and sisters. Like Silver, they saw nothing unique in Hitler's attempt to annihilate the Jewish people. Their sense of Jewish history told them that this had been the ultimate desire of tyrants and demagogues for nearly two thousand years. While some Jewish leaders might come forward with piecemeal plans to save European Jewry, Silver offered American Jews the ultimate rescue plan. Unless they succeeded in creating a Jewish state,

there would be little sense in trying to send food to the starving masses in the Jewish ghettos or even in bombing the death camps and the trains that brought Jews to their extinction. Unless the problem of Jewish homelessness, the basic cause of anti-Semitism, was solved, future generations of Jews would have to suffer in other death camps.

The conference's Palestine Committee, charged with the wording of a Palestine resolution to be presented to all the delegates, discussed Silver's call for the historical rescue of the Jewish people. Moderates and non-Zionists on the committee launched a final effort to present their case. Judge Proskauer appealed to the Zionists to compromise for the sake of unity. He threatened to withdraw the American Jewish Committee from the American Jewish Conference if the Zionists persisted in pushing through a resolution supporting the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine.<sup>68</sup> Dr. James Heller, a Reform rabbi and Zionist, also continued to advocate a moderate course of action. He argued that "extreme" measures would only intensify the hostile attitudes of the State Department and Foreign Office.<sup>69</sup>

Robert Goldman, a dedicated Zionist for over a quarter of a century, who represented the Union of American Hebrew Congregations at the conference, was also in favor of a compromise resolution. He decided to confront Silver's thesis that the best response to Hitler's extermination policies was immediately to create a Jewish state so that future persecution would be impossible. Goldman told the Palestine Committee that American Jewry faced two problems. The long-range problem was the need to create a Jewish state. The "immediate problem," he continued "is rescue; and I don't care what else you say or how you characterize it, or what you say about me for saying it, that is the immediate problem and that is the problem that we should be concerned with." Goldman insisted that the first task of American Jewry was to save their European kin and he warned that "if the long run problem which we want to project is going to interfere with the solution of the immediate problem, . . . you have no right to insist on that problem that may result in the loss of thousands and hundreds of thousands of more Jews that could otherwise be saved in the next few years." Some British and American officials, he explained, were totally opposed to increased Jewish immigration to Palestine, while others supported opening Palestine's doors as a humanitarian response to Hitler's extermination policies. If Zionists insisted on demanding statehood, Arab opposition in the entire Middle East would intensify, making it impossible for proponents of increased immigration to win their case. If this happened, hundreds of thousands of Jews would be left "in places where they can not be rescued."<sup>70</sup>

Proponents of Jewish statehood on the Palestine committee wasted little time before rebutting the moderates' position. Morris Rothenberg reminded the conference delegates that they were not creating a commonwealth for those Jews who

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

were “lucky” enough to live in the United States, but for those who were “denied” and “disinherited.” Louis Levinthal of the ZOA cautioned Joseph Proskauer that the British would interpret the conference’s failure to endorse the commonwealth goal as a sign that Zionists had abandoned the goal of statehood.<sup>71</sup>

Zionists on the committee challenged Robert Goldman’s position that first priority should be given to the rescue of European Jewry. Robert Szold commended Goldman for his sincerity, but warned the conference delegates that “the Jews of Palestine would feel that a blow had been delivered to them today if we here assembled deliberately refrain from holding out to them a helping hand.” Hayim Greenberg, the socialist Zionist who earlier in the year had accused American Jewry of moral bankruptcy for failing to do enough to rescue those Jews facing extermination, also disagreed with Goldman’s thesis. Greenberg repeated a point Silver had made in his address and argued that the right of Jews to emigrate to Palestine was linked to their right to create a state there. A campaign directed solely at opening Palestine’s doors would not be successful, and he feared that a failure to clarify the political future of Palestine would only create more unrest among the country’s Arab population.<sup>72</sup>

Emanuel Neumann delivered the most articulate and vigorous condemnation of a “rescue-first” strategy. The “immediate problem” facing the conference, he said, was not peculiar to the Jews of their day. For centuries, Jews had been in a “permanent state of emergency.” He charged that Jewish leaders always concerned themselves with the “immediate problems,” thereby ignoring the underlying cause of their suffering and persecution. Had Jews dealt with the problem of “homelessness” earlier, he speculated, “either a Hitler would not have arisen in our time, or, if one had, we might have had a country under Jewish control in which Jews of Germany and other lands could have been received—and received in large numbers.” Neumann complained: “It has been our misfortune throughout our history that we have not been able to look ahead, to plan ahead, and to provide this radical solution.” If American Jewry in 1943 failed to put an end to the long history of Jewish suffering by supporting the creation of a commonwealth in Palestine, Neumann concluded, “we shall be contemptible in our own eyes.”<sup>73</sup>

Neumann’s and Silver’s argument won many more supporters than did Goldman’s. With the exception of four delegates, including the representatives of the American Jewish Committee, the entire American Jewish Conference voted for a resolution demanding “the fulfillment of the Balfour Declaration, and of the Mandate for Palestine whose intent and underlying purpose, based on the ‘historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine,’ was to reconstitute Palestine as the Jewish Commonwealth.”<sup>74</sup> Proskauer responded to the Zionist victory by withdrawing the American Jewish Committee from the American Jewish Conference.<sup>75</sup>

The euphoric spirit of the American Jewish Conference carried over to the annual convention of the Zionist Organization of America, which was held two weeks

later. ZOA President Levinthal told the convention that the American Jewish Conference had had a revolutionary impact on American Zionism. The demand for a Jewish commonwealth was no longer an idea held by Zionists; it had become the “credo” of all American Jews.<sup>76</sup> ZOA speakers seemed to enjoy repeating the formula so dramatically presented by Abba Hillel Silver at the American Jewish Conference. For almost two thousand years Jews had suffered through one persecution after another. Now Jews had a “rendezvous with destiny.” The time had finally arrived to put an end to Jewish national homelessness, the basic cause of Jewish suffering.

Abba Hillel Silver made a triumphant appearance before the ZOA convention and announced that the American Jewish Conference proved that Zionists were not simply a party within the American Jewish community, but were *the* Jewish people. Remembering his triumph at the conference, he told the ZOA delegates: “There was real danger of conciliation, of what has come to be called ‘appeasement’; there were threats made, there were dire forebodings, and the weak began to waiver, but fortunately the rank and file of the Zionist forces remained firm and strong.” Receiving a standing ovation, Silver continued: “We are on the eve of a messianic era for our people. We have gone through the purging, the cleansing, the terror, the apocalyptic dread. . . . [I]t depends upon us, upon our merit, upon our desserts, whether that hour of redemption will be hastened or retarded.”<sup>77</sup>

#### AMERICAN ZIONISM AND THE RESCUE OF EUROPEAN JEWRY

Besides addressing the ZOA convention, Silver spent the weeks following the American Jewish Conference reorganizing the American Zionist community’s political apparatus, the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs.<sup>78</sup> Before the American Jewish Conference, the ZOA, Hadassah, Mizrachi, and Poale Zion, fearing that a powerful AECZA would threaten their autonomy, had thwarted Emanuel Neumann’s efforts to turn the body into the vanguard of political Zionism in the United States. Neumann’s frustration with the impotency of the AECZA had finally led to his resignation as the organization’s director in early 1943.<sup>79</sup>

By the summer of 1943, Zionist leaders concluded that it was necessary to revitalize the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs. As early as June 1942, Chaim Weizmann had decided that Abba Hillel Silver was the “most suitable” candidate to lead Zionist political forces in the United States. Weizmann’s moderate nature and policies contrasted dramatically with Silver’s aggressiveness and stubborn commitment to the Biltmore program, but the future president of the state of Israel recognized Silver’s charisma and talents and threw his support behind a plan to give the rabbi control of American Zionism’s political machine.

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

On August 26, 1943, on the eve of the opening of the American Jewish Conference, Silver's opponents and supporters completed a compromise under which Silver and his rival Stephen Wise became co-chairmen of the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs. The compromise also allowed Silver to assume sole leadership of the organization's all-important executive committee.<sup>80</sup>

Wise graciously welcomed Silver to the AECZA, saying that he "looked forward to working with him towards the fulfillment of our common aim to make Palestine a Jewish Commonwealth." Silver told the Emergency Committee that they were on the "eve of great decisions" and he confided to them that "those who know him know that his bark is worse than his bite." Under Silver's brilliant, though sometimes overbearing, leadership the AECZA was reorganized and renamed the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC).<sup>81</sup>

The AZEC claimed to represent the 95 percent of American Jewry that, it maintained, had expressed their support for a Jewish commonwealth through the American Jewish Conference. Within a few months of the conference's closing, the AZEC and Silver were seeking congressional backing for a resolution that would officially express American support for the creation of a Jewish commonwealth, while AZEC propagandists attempted to convince the American public that the establishment of a Jewish state would benefit the United States as well as the Jewish people. At the helm of the AZEC, Silver took steps to insure that American Zionists would give first priority to the "long range" problem confronting Jewry: national homelessness. However, Silver's charisma and fiery temper did not prevent some Zionists from questioning his strategy.

Rose Jacobs, a former president of Hadassah and an American representative to the Jewish Agency's Zionist Executive, wrote to Silver shortly after the American Jewish Conference to express her support of Jewish statehood. While she was pleased with the outcome of the American Jewish Conference, she also feared that it would be disastrous for Zionists to devote all their energies and resources to the commonwealth campaign. Jewish nationalists could not realistically expect to win American and British support for statehood in the near future. Therefore, Jacobs suggested that American Zionists pursue a short-term strategy of attacking British immigration restrictions to Palestine rather than stressing the goal of statehood.<sup>82</sup> Implicitly rejecting Silver's contention that the right of Jews to immigrate to Palestine could not be separated from their right of sovereignty, Jacobs, adopting a position taken by several AECZA members in May 1943, argued that an anti-White Paper campaign could be linked with efforts to rescue European Jewry. Thus a humanitarian plea for increased Jewish immigration to Palestine might be more effective than demanding Jewish statehood.<sup>83</sup>

Silver and most of the Zionist leadership nonetheless insisted on the primacy of the statehood campaign. Nahum Goldmann summarized their positions when he stated: "Thinking in terms of political reality we should fight for constructive

action. We should use the fine machinery we have built up for the constructive program. Great Britain is now beginning to discuss the Near East, and there is not time first to spend six months fighting the White Paper, then to start talking about the Commonwealth.”<sup>84</sup>

Silver and Goldmann’s views triumphed within the American Zionist Emergency Council.<sup>85</sup> Under Silver’s leadership American Zionists organized congressional and popular support for the creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine. Zionist advances during the months and years that followed the August 1943 American Jewish Conference significantly contributed to the successful establishment of Israel in 1948.

Ironically and tragically, the Zionists’ decision to give first priority to the creation of a Jewish commonwealth weakened American Jewish rescue efforts. Concentration on the statehood issue meant that few resources were left for the rescue campaign. Abba Hillel Silver and other Zionist leaders occupied themselves with the campaign for a Jewish state, while their talents and energies were sorely needed in the struggle to press the Roosevelt administration for rescue action. Jewish nationalist leaders were not blind to the suffering of the European co-religionists. Zionists grieved and mourned for the victims of Nazi mass murder, but they felt that other organizations, including the World Jewish Congress and the Jewish Labor Committee, should have primary responsibility to press for aid to European Jewry.<sup>86</sup> Zionist organizations and agencies occupied themselves with what they perceived to be a higher and more important form of rescue. The creation of a Jewish state, Zionists religiously believed, would save future generations of Jews from other Auschwitzes and Treblinkas. As a result, the extremely efficient lobby and propaganda machine fashioned by the American Zionist Emergency Council championed Jewish statehood, not the rescue of European Jewry.<sup>87</sup>

The ideological and political imperatives of Jewish nationalism actually forced Zionists to oppose some rescue efforts advanced by other groups. The Palestinian emissaries of the Irgun who made up Peter Bergson’s Committee for a Jewish Army were the authors of several rescue plans opposed by the Zionist organizations. A month before the American Jewish Conference, Bergson and his principal associate, Samuel Merlin, organized an Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe. At the conference the Bergsonites drew up a rescue plan and created the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe (ECSJPE), whose only goal was to press for the rescue of European Jewry. The writer Ben Hecht worked with the group, as did Congressman Will Rogers, Jr. (D., Cal.) and Senator Guy M. Gillette (D., Iowa). The members of the ECSJPE believed that the rescue of European Jewry superseded all other issues, reasoning that if European Jewry perished there would be little point in creating a Jewish state. Bergson remarked: “we cannot avoid the fact that our work will be determined by the fate of the European Jews. For if they perish, the Jews the world over will

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

forever remain an international sore with no practical way for a dignified and honorable solution.”<sup>88</sup>

The principal objective of the Bergson group was to convince the Allied governments to establish an agency to rescue the European Jews. Shortly after its establishment in July 1943, ECSJPE began building public support for a congressional resolution that it planned to have introduced by Senator Gillette and Congressman Rogers. The resolution would call on President Roosevelt to create a governmental agency of diplomatic, economic, and military experts, charged specifically with the rescue of European Jewry. Bergson supporters introduced the resolution in the House of Representatives and the Senate on November 9, 1943. It intentionally avoided making any mention of Palestine or a Jewish state. Bergson and Merlin had decided to try to avoid such politically controversial issues as a Jewish state and to present rescue to the American public as a humanitarian necessity. ECSJPE propaganda stressed that the American ideals of justice and freedom, for which American soldiers were dying, required that everything humanly possible be done to save European Jewry from destruction. The Bergsonites feared that any mention of the Jewish claim to Palestine would politicize their demands for rescue, making it easier for the Allied governments to refuse to act. Bergson and Merlin also believed that the interests of Palestine would be served by their rescue resolution, even if the Zionist program was not specifically mentioned. Eri Jabotinsky, the son of right-wing ideologue Vladimir Jabotinsky and a member of the ECSJPE explained:

[O]nce the [rescue] commission is created it will certainly discover that Palestine is the most appropriate location for an asylum, and also that Palestine must be considered in connection with the creation of other asylums, for no country will accept several tens of thousands of Jewish refugees unless it is guaranteed that they will be removed after the cessation of hostilities. Removed where to? The commission will soon enough discover that the only answer is Palestine. The commission will probably become the central instrument in the fight for Palestine.<sup>89</sup>

Most American Zionists did not agree with Bergson’s views. Silver, Wise, and their lieutenants feared that Zionist political efforts would be undermined by Bergson’s attempts to win support from legislators and the Yiddish and American press. The American Jewish Conference and the American Zionist Emergency Council both published statements accusing the Bergson group of opportunism and stressing that Bergson did not represent the American Jewish community. Zionists also attempted to convince Bergson sympathizers to defect from the ECSJPE. Zionist representatives even met with Senator Gillette and unsuccessfully tried to convince him to support a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine instead of Bergson’s rescue commission legislation.<sup>90</sup>

Zionist leaders could not publicly oppose the creation of a rescue agency, but they did seek to change the wording of the Bergson rescue resolution.<sup>91</sup> At hearings held by the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Stephen Wise, co-chairman of the AZEC, maintained that the Bergson group was not a responsible part of the Jewish community and that its program was not in accordance with the plans worked out by the legitimate American Jewish organizations. He argued that the Bergson resolution was inadequate because of the absence of any demand for free Jewish immigration into Palestine. Wise's statement angered Congressman Will Rogers, Jr., one of the cosponsors of the rescue agency bill, who responded that his resolution was specifically designed to avoid "injecting the ancient and acrimonious issue of Palestine into a resolution specifically involving relief [rescue]." Rogers shared the Bergsonite view that linking rescue and Palestine would allow Roosevelt and Churchill to treat the Jewish appeal for help as a political, not a humanitarian issue.<sup>92</sup>

Zionist opposition to the Bergson group continued even after January 1944, when Franklin Roosevelt established the War Refugee Board, an official United States rescue agency. During the summer of that year, Bergson and his colleagues were campaigning for the establishment of emergency refugee shelters in Palestine. Under their plan, Jewish refugees would be admitted to Palestine on a temporary basis, as a lifesaving measure. They would not have the legal right to remain in Palestine when the war ended.<sup>93</sup> The Bergsonites realized that Palestine was in an ideal location to grant shelter to Jewish refugees who might escape from Hungary, Romania, or Bulgaria into Turkey. The emergency refugee shelters plan, which was supported by the War Refugee Board, offered a way around the British White Paper of 1939 and its restrictive immigration policy.<sup>94</sup> The plan gained added relevance in mid-July 1944, when the Hungarian government offered to release all Jews with visas to Palestine. The British and American governments accepted the Hungarian offer on August 11, although they did not explain how it would be carried out. A Nazi-engineered coup in Hungary on October 14, 1944, brought an end to any hope of acting on the Hungarian proposal.<sup>95</sup>

American Zionists vehemently opposed the concept of Palestinian emergency refugee shelters. They feared that Bergson's plan would sabotage their efforts to get a pro-commonwealth resolution passed in Congress, which, Zionists believed, would be an important step in the ultimate and final rescue of the Jewish people. Zionist unwillingness to sacrifice this long-term goal forced them to oppose the Bergson plan and put them in the precarious position of seeming to prefer "to keep Jews out of Palestine rather than yield on the Commonwealth."<sup>96</sup>

As the situation of Hungarian Jewry became more precarious, Zionists cooperated in the rescue efforts of the Jewish organizations and the War Refugee Board, but they adamantly refused to endorse the establishment of emergency refugee shelters in Palestine. The very notion of Jews being labeled refugees while they

### *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism*

were in the Jewish national home was anathema to most American Zionists. AZEC spokesmen claimed that Bergson's plan was unnecessary since political and transportation difficulties would only allow a small number of Jews to leave Hungary. Those Jews who did escape could be accommodated within the White Paper limits since fourteen thousand Palestine visas were still available.<sup>97</sup>

Zionist opposition to emergency refugee shelters also stemmed from their conception of how a Jewish state would be created. Bergson and his colleagues were classic revolutionaries. They believed that a Jewish state would only be established through armed struggle. The Bergsonites were prepared to see Jews admitted to Palestine as refugees because they knew that the final fate of the refugees would be decided by Jewish military might. American Zionists, unlike the Bergsonites, were revolutionaries only to the extent that they wished radically to alter the historical fate of the Jewish people. However, the means to this radical end would not involve armed struggle. The entire structure of political Zionism in the United States reflected the Zionists' belief that the Jewish state could be created through diplomatic negotiations. This being the case, Zionists believed that their acceptance of Bergson's plan would weaken their bargaining position with the British and American governments. The first rule of negotiation is always to ask for more than what you want. If Zionists allowed Jews to be temporarily interned in Palestine, they would seem to be surrendering the central point on which their case was based: that Palestine was, by right, the land of the Jews. The Balfour Declaration had recognized this claim and all Zionist propaganda was aimed at convincing the world of its legitimacy.

The Zionists were ideologically and politically unable to support the establishment of emergency refugee shelters in Palestine, just as they found it impossible to give the rescue of European Jewry priority over the creation of a Jewish commonwealth. Silver and his compatriots could not distinguish between the rescue issue and the statehood issue. They seemed to be inextricably linked by the Zionist view of Jewish history. For nearly two thousand years Jews had suffered through a seemingly unending series of persecutions. Hitler's attempt to exterminate European Jewry was unique, Zionists thought, only in its dimension. Theodor Herzl had offered the Jews a chance to save themselves. Silver and his followers despairingly reasoned that the failure to achieve the Zionist dream before 1933 was a principal cause for the suffering of European Jewry. They resolved to put an end, once and for all, to the awful cycle of suffering in order to insure that future generations need not share the fate of their European ancestors. World War II, which Zionists expected would end with the redrawing of the world's boundaries, seemed to offer Jewish nationalists one last chance to achieve their goal. For the Zionists at the American Jewish Conference, failure to seize the time would be criminal.

Ironically, the Zionists' zealous commitment to solve the Jewish problem led them to underestimate significantly the very dimension of the European catastro-

phe. When Zionists negotiated with Allied governments, they continued to insist that a Jewish state would have to be created after the war in order to accommodate the large number of Jewish refugees who would survive Hitler's slaughter. The logic of this situation led Zionists to think in terms of the survival of European Jewry, not their eradication. American Zionists rejected Chaim Weizmann's "dangerously pessimistic" estimate of the number of Jews who would die in Hitler's Europe. Zionist convention after Zionist convention included references to the almost mystical ability of the Jews to survive persecution, and Zionist spokesmen tended to underestimate the total number of Jewish dead in their speeches. Thus, over a year after Stephen Wise's dramatic announcement that two million European Jews were dead, Abba Hillel Silver used the same figure when testifying before a congressional committee.<sup>98</sup> Even when the extent of the Holocaust began to be apparent near the end of the war, Zionists still insisted on focusing on the number of Jews who would survive in Europe, not on those already dead, and on the necessity of creating a Jewish state to handle the postwar Jewish refugee crisis.<sup>99</sup>

During 1944 and 1945, the American Zionist Emergency Council developed the experience and resources that would make it into one of the most efficient political lobbies in America. Special efforts were made to capture the loyalty of specific segments of the American population. Emanuel Neumann and his propagandists labored especially hard at convincing American liberals of the necessity for the creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine. While this work progressed, the Nazi crematoriums continued to dispose of the corpses of slaughtered Jews.